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→ Counter-Attrition Programs in the US Military

↘ Of special interest were "counter-attrition" programs in the US Military, whether in the conceptual, research, development, or operational stages. This review included the US Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. Attention was addressed to any strategy or mechanism intended to reduce undesirable attrition in a military environment. Both up-front and downstream programs were scrutinized. Programs addressing such major issues as realistic expectations, transition from training to unit, and unit disillusionment were considered. Of interest were pre-military preparation, coping skills, behavioral modification, continuing education, retraining, motivational adjustment programs, counseling, use of post facilities, unit cohesion strategies, and the like.

The primary data gathering tool was the personal and telephone interview. Considering the exploratory nature of this investigation, the interviews were of an unstructured nature. Maximum latitude was permitted to allow for expression of strongly held opinions, and relevant sources of expertise.

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COUNTER-ATTRITION PROGRAMS IN THE MILITARY

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High first-term enlisted attrition rates continue to be a major concern in the U.S. Military. The purpose of this paper is to create increased awareness of three categories of military programs which either presently demonstrate, or show promise of impacting significantly upon the enlisted attrition. Programs will be described which represent (a) pretraining, (b) realistic expectations, and (c) retraining.

The military pretraining programs to be represented are not primarily designed to counter attrition. They are programs conducted by the Army National Guard which combine Guard recruitment with job preparation and placement. These programs, however, show sufficient promise in lowering attrition to warrant representation in this discussion.

The first of such programs began in Oakland, California approximately 4 years ago. It was, and still is, designed for unemployed, and economically disadvantaged youth, 17-22 years of age. The basic attraction to the Program is the enhanced opportunity for a job. In order to get the help needed to acquire that job, one must graduate from a 10 week military preparation program and sign for a six year Guard obligation. The greatest emphasis in the Program of Instruction (POI) is given to military skills and basic literacy skills, but also career assessment and pre-employment training. The military skills component is primarily physical fitness training, drills and ceremonies, and military field trips. Basic skills training consists mostly of reading, writing, and mathematics, but with some "survival training." Survival training places a heavy emphasis upon the importance and value of community awareness and service, "banking," "nutrition," "cultural studies," and other fundamental education. Career assessment takes up one (1) week of the program, and consists of testing, evaluation, and vocational counseling. Pre-employment training occupies about 1½ weeks and addresses a plethora of concerns such as how to complete an application form, how to prepare a resume, how to conduct oneself in an interview and on the job, and introduction to selection tests used by employers, and the like. The Program focuses upon the development of coping skills for employment and military settings, discipline, civics, teamwork, and the skills to pass the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery. All of this adds up to \$1500 to \$2000 per pupil. Perhaps as few as 20% of the applicants are accepted. Of this 20%, approximately 50% graduate. Rejections and failures derive primarily from substandard literacy skills, and negative attitudes toward the military. At least 90% of the graduates successfully meet Army screening criteria, and proceed to Basic Training. Of interest for the active Army is that there has been only about a 10% attrition rate among such pretrained recruits throughout Basic and Advanced Individual Training (AIT). Non-pretrained recruits have attrited at approximately double that rate during the full training phase. Also of potential interest is that perhaps as many as 1/3 indicate that they would prefer to remain with the active Army rather than return to their communities and fulfill

their ARNG obligation. At present, upon successful completion of Army training, the new Guardsmen return to their community where they will receive help in getting MOS-related jobs, and attend monthly drills, and summer training. To private sector employers, perhaps the most attractive feature of the Program derives from the credibility of military training. Employers appear to be more willing to hire a youth who has demonstrated the discipline assumed to be required to successfully complete Basic and AIT. At present the original Oakland program has been adapted to Los Angeles and Sacramento, California, Seattle, the tri-city area in Washington state, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Realistic Expectations. The military has made several recent audio-visual efforts specifically designed to provide new recruits with a heightened awareness of what the military will be like and how to deal with it. It has been hypothesized that enlisted attrition should in some degree be inversely related to such increased awareness. The first of these efforts was conducted by the Marine Corps (circa 1978). An 80 minute color video tape was developed jointly by a private contractor and the Training Support Center of the USMC Parris Island Recruit Depot. The film is considered a Realistic Job Preview (RJP), attempting to provide recruits an accurate portrayal of what life in the Marine Corps would be like. It includes footage from all phases of recruit training complete with voice overs and interviews. The film was evaluated by Horner, Mobley and Meglino (1979) based upon its viewing by 678 Parris Island male, first-term, enlisted recruits. It was shown after swearing in, during the second full day at the Recruit Depot. Results did not show a significant association between film viewing and attrition by the end of training, but did so in the hypothesized direction after 6 months and 12 months.

It would be of interest to have the evaluation of the above film replicated by an independent research group. Such an independent evaluation was conducted in regard to a San Diego (Navy) version of the Marine Corps film. The San Diego film involved the same contractor, and was produced by the Center for Naval Technical Training in 1979. It is approximately 1 hour in length and shows actual Navy enlisted recruits, DIs, chow lines, obstacle courses, and the like. No professional actors were used. The evaluation of this film showed no significant differences in attrition rates between those (n=1049) who viewed the film and those (n=1002) who did not (Lockman, 1980). Similar "no impact" findings have been reported by a recent initial evaluation of a Great Lakes version of this film.

An additional Navy effort is a 20 minute recruit "coping skills" film (Sarason, circa 1979; personal communication). The film content focuses upon "(a) what to expect, (b) how you may feel, and (c) what to do." Again, initial evaluation has shown no impact upon attrition. A 6 month follow-up of this film is forthcoming.

More recently, the Army has developed realistic expectations and coping skills films. The realistic expectations film is a 28 minute color video-tape providing information about the content of Basic Combat Training (BCT). It consists of four components: Introduction, Weapons Training, Individual Tactical Training, and Necessary Testing Activities (I WIN). This videotape, like the others, shows actual situations, though it concentrates on training. Though it has a professional narrator, all participants are actual on-site personnel at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina. At present, the film is operational at all Army installations where purely BCT is offered. It is either shown within the context of the reception center or slightly later in the BCT unit. It has only been very recently that this film was made operational, and no evaluations are available.

Retraining. Of particular interest in this paper are enlisted retraining programs. These are basically interventions which perhaps represent the closest device the U.S. Military presently employs toward the establishment of counter-attrition programs, per se.

Of primary interest are programs designed for marginal performers and/or problem personnel who show potential for development into productive soldiers or sailors. The most comprehensive and established of such programs at the present time is the U.S. Army Retraining Brigade (USARB) at Camp Funston, Ft. Riley, Kansas. The original USARB Program, known as the Army Correctional Training Facility, became operational in 1968. It represented a landmark for the Army correctional system due to its emphasis "upon systematic restoration and utilization of potentially wasted manpower." (USARB Annual Report, 1980). During its first 4 years, the Correctional Training Facility received over 23,000 prisoners from Army stockades worldwide and returned over 19,000 for subsequent service.

Physical training is the feature most emphasized in the present USARB POI. It is deliberately designed to exert sustained physical and mental stress within a spartan military environment. Mental stress is generated from continued observation, daily evaluations on a variety of dimensions, peer pressure, and high performance standards.

USARB graduates are given a special Enlisted Evaluation Report (EER) after 60 days in their new duty assignments. Of 457 FY80 graduates returned to duty, 71% were rated as promotable immediately or ahead of their peers. Only 10% were rated nonpromotable. This seems a remarkable turnaround considering that only about 4 months previously, these individuals were awaiting court-martial in an Installation Detention Facility (or stockade).

A significant outgrowth of USARB, is a co-located program at Ft. Riley called the Individual Effectiveness Course (IEC). This program became operational in 1977 and is significant in that it has served as a model program for light offenders who are regarded as having potential for productive duty. The IEC is distinguished from USARB in that it is for Ft. Riley enlisted personnel only, is a non-confinement facility,

and is designed to counteract maladaptive propensities before significant punishable offenses actually occur. The POI is 6 weeks long and otherwise is very similar to USARB. There may be as many as 50 trainees in each class, who may or may not graduate. Recommendations as to retention or elimination are made to the unit commander in each individual case.

In a study of 197 IEC trainees, 54% graduated and returned to duty, 40% were recommended for various administrative separations, and 6% were lost through AWOLs or medical profiles. At initial referral, unit commanders indicated probable actions to be taken within 30 days if the soldiers had not been admitted to the IEC. Predicted actions were 33% Expeditious Discharges, 32% Chapter 13s (unsuitability), 27% miscellaneous transfers and administrative separations, and 8% Article 15s. That is, some punitive action was expected for all 197 trainees. Fifty-four percent of these 197 graduated from the program, and returned to duty. As with USARB, EERs were conducted for these graduates 60 days after returning to duty. In terms of advancement potential, nearly half were rated as promotable immediately or ahead of their peers. This seems to stand in marked contrast to the above dim prognosis prior to IEC training.

A counterpart Navy program became operational in 1979 after having carefully studied USARB and the IEC. This program, called the Behavioral Skills Training Unit (BEST) is located at the Naval Amphibious Base in Little Creek, Virginia. It is shorter in duration than the IEC - 4 weeks instead of 6--but again heavily emphasizes physical training such as daily distance running, an obstacle course twice weekly, and group sports. Additional emphasis is placed upon individual and group counseling, goal setting, and academic advancement. The mission of BEST is to provide behavioral skill training to low and marginal performing first term enlisted personnel that will enable them to successfully complete their obligated service. Criteria for admission include no disciplinary action pending, at least 2 years of active obligated service remaining, and the potential to complete enlistment, but unlikely to do so given the present demeanor and record of achievement.

As of June 1981, BEST had enrolled 47 classes, averaging approximately 24 each, for a total of 1145 trainees. Of these, 86% graduated, with the remainder either failing the program or being returned to their Command. All participants, including nongraduates, are evaluated at 6 and 12 month intervals subsequent to BEST training. Of 700 6 month evaluations, 69% were rated as performing average or above. Six months prior to BEST training, 78% were awarded non-judicial punishments and/or courts martial, whereas 6 months after BEST, only 33% received similar punishments. Twenty-two percent have received recognition for outstanding performance, and an additional 22% have been promoted at least once. The 12 month evaluations reveal a similar pattern, with even greater percentages (79%) having received recognition for outstanding performance or at least one promotion. Again, as with USARB and the IEC, a dramatic turnaround seems indicated.

An additional Army program clearly shows promise as a potentially productive counter-attrition program. This program, called the Intensified Training Unit (ITU) is co-located with the Installation Detention Facility (stockade) at Ft. Carson, Colorado. The ITU seems unique at the present time in that it may be the only Army Correctional Custody Facility (CCF) dedicated to a retraining rather than a work detail orientation. Again, USARB and the IEC served as models for the development of the ITU POI. The POI is 30 days, and is consistent in content and objectives to programs already described. The ITU received its retraining mandate in 1978 as a part of an effort by the Ft. Carson Law Enforcement Command to upgrade its correctional program to a more remedial as opposed to custodial format. Like other CCFs, the ITU is a non-confinement unit, providing for close supervision over soldiers who commit minor infractions. A key limitation, at present with the ITU, is that a punishable offense is required for admission. A review of statistical data maintained for a three month period in 1978 showed that of 67 correctees who completed the ITU and returned to their units, 42 have since received performance ratings of good to outstanding. More substantial data are needed for a complete evaluation of the effectiveness of the ITU, but preliminary indications suggest positive outcomes similar to previously described programs.

Other similar programs could be mentioned that now exist, or are getting under way, throughout the Armed Forces. The above programs are among the oldest, best established, best evaluated, to date. There are indications that such programs are proliferating at the local level. The ITU, for example, has sent packets of information to at least a half dozen interested installations thus far. Both the Defense Audit Service and the Army Audit Agency have made their own analyses of several of the above programs--both concluding cost-effectiveness and recommending expansion.